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And This, Our Measure
Figurative Realism and Workaday Culture

A thesis
presented to
the faculty of the Department of Art and Design
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Fine Arts

by
Perry Johnson
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Keywords: painting, alienation, conformity, machine, figurative

ABSTRACT

And This, Our Measure Figurative Realism and Workaday Culture

by
Perry Johnson

Man has created vast and powerful systems. These systems and their associated protocols, dogmas, and conventions tend to limit rather than liberate. Evaluation based on homogeneity threatens the devaluation of our humanity. This paper and the artwork it supports examine contemporary culture and its failings in the stewardship of the humanist ideal.

My paintings referenced herein are satirical narratives. The story told is one of alienation and evisceration. The visual subject matter is the human figure and environments dominated by architectural geometry. The male figures are conspicuously turned from view, a visual cue to their estrangement. Parallel and subordinate thoughts from the fields of psychoanalysis, economics, religion, and political science will be discussed.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I greatly appreciate my committee members for their years of experience, many of which have been shared with me.

I recognize in my parents, the capacity of humanity. What good there is in me began in them.

The continually blurring edge of my being belongs to Donna Wilt.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

My work is undeniably autobiographical. The paintings come from my need to make sense and to make fun. I have not sought to be novel and I take comfort that after my research I can claim no novelty. I feel certain that I have touched on issues that affect a much broader audience than myself. The reader should bear in mind the role of this paper as a supplement to the referenced artwork. Given that function, it is the necessarily serious explanation of a joke's punch line.

The human figure is the primary visual form of my work. Human beings have an affinity for even the most crude images of the human body. In hiding the identity of the figures, I invite the viewer to assume a character's identity. The environments my figures occupy are dominated by geometric constructs. These fabrications impose on the organic. There would be no cause for alarm if these were only theoretical abstractions. The impositions on the very humanity of our being are concrete. Effects of the machine are widespread and far reaching.

CHAPTER 2

THE MACHINE'S ATOMS – HISTORY AND IDEOLOGY

The Machine and its influence is so deeply rooted in the modern mind that it involves a great deal of work to extricate it for observation. In the strictest literal sense, man has – for all intents and purposes – always used machines. I will not enter into arguments attempting to define what constitutes a machine in the modern sense. The matter I intend to bring into focus is the point and periphery of our relationships to machines in the modern era. Machines, be they tangible mechanisms or abstract institutions, are of human invention. These children of ours however have proven to be quite intractable, so much so that we often find it easier to comply.

The Individual

Individuation

Like many stories, perhaps it is better to begin in the beginning. All but the most insane, enlightened, or pompous of us have no particular difficulty in using the singular pronoun *I*. Use of this simple grammatical construct is only a point of protrusion for the one concept that defines mankind – that of self-awareness.

‘Life being aware of itself’ happens every day on the smallest of scales. Richard Hughes’ book *A High Wind in Jamaica* is quoted by Fromm.

And then an event did occur, to Emily, of considerable importance. She suddenly realised who she was. There is little reason that one can see why it should not have happened to her five years earlier, or even five years later; and none, why it should

have come that particular afternoon. She had been playing house in a nook ... walking rather aimlessly aft, thinking vaguely about some bees and a fairy queen, when it suddenly flashed into her mind that she was *she*. She stopped dead, and began looking over all of her person which came within the range of her eyes. She could not see much, except a fore-shortened view of the front of her frock, and her hands when she lifted them for inspection; but it was enough for her to form a rough idea of the little body she suddenly realised to be hers.

She began to laugh, rather mockingly. 'Well!' she thought, in effect: 'Fancy *you*, of all people, going and getting caught like this! – You can't get out of it now, not for a very long time: you'll have to go through with being a child, and growing up, and getting old, before you'll be quit of this mad prank!' (Fromm *Escape From Freedom* 26-27)

An infant makes no distinction of self. In fact, children have an innocent egocentrism. There is a universal clarity in this view. All the child can perceive, belongs to the child's universe. Submission to the authority of a parent or even kindness to another being are not acts of submission to or of reaching out to the external world. The child has wishes that are suppressed by both other people and by the physical environment. These frustrated desires lead increasingly to antagonism. It is this opposition that helps to push the child from the psychological womb. (Fromm *Escape From Freedom* 24-25)

Similarly, Fromm equates the connection primitive cultures have with the earth and the animal world to this infant and mother connection. (Fromm *The Art of Loving* 10) Human civilization has become aware of itself as separate and distinct from other forms of nature. Harold Kushner interprets the Bible's story of the Garden of Eden in a unique light. Kushner sees a "Birth of Conscience" in the book of Genesis. After partaking of the

Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, life is more complicated. Humans are no longer driven by and accountable only to instinct. There is a separation from Nature that we attempt to bridge. Within many cultures, there remains a connection to natural forces through animal gods or totems. Whatever the specifics, the goal is a reunion with Nature from which we as a species feel separate. (Kushner 21-22) With self-awareness comes the awareness of the self as separate from all else. Fromm continues with the Garden story, pointing out that Adam and Eve are not simply suffering the embarrassment of their physical exposure, but that there is a deeper emotion. These people are separate, one from another; they are aware of their differences. From this separateness, comes anxiety. (Fromm *The Art of Loving* 9-12) Ways of dealing with this anxiety will be discussed later.

A House is Not a Home. The child in Figure 1 has only recently come to realize himself as an individual. He is no dullard however. He sees his would-be future in the man walking his poodle. This man in the background is living a common if not normal life. He lives in one of a number of pseudo-homes. It is a small dwelling and his dog is a perfect fit – small and civilized. Terms like dog and master could well be interchangeable. The canine irrigates a small patch of a narrow yard. The central piece of architecture is a rather large house. We cannot properly call it a home. No one lives there; it is quite likely that those who work there by day live in pseudo-homes after the fashion of those in the background row. Mockingly, the yard next door displays the signage, ‘For Sale By Owner’. The lad will barely be his own man before he must sell himself. It would seem that the boy who has been at play with the water stream now has a kink in his hose.

The water pools as time passes. He is becoming aware of the fragility of his fleeting world.



Figure 1:
Perry Johnson – A House is Not a Home
collection of the artist
50in x 68in - oil on canvas.

Autonomy

Aristotle held that man needs others for survival and therefore is a political and social being by nature. (Mészáros 254) Western culture and in particular American culture is thoroughly invested in the concept of independence. Quite opposite from Aristotle's state, we take exceptional pride in our autonomy as individuals. While it is true that our direct dependence on nature has been removed, it has not been through our individual efforts but through the work of social and political beings. The word political is used here to refer to individuals who act in the common good of a *polis* or state. The fact that the products of our work and indeed the work itself has been abstracted or alienated away from our person makes this charade quite easy to continue. (Mészáros 258) With money as a

medium of interchange, appliances and mechanisms of convenience, and equally efficient communication systems, one may easily fail to notice interpersonal relationships at all. Autonomy is a false notion in the end.

Leisure. Closely related to autonomy in our minds is the idea of leisure. After all, it is leisure we were promised when the machine overlords marched in. Once alienated, work holds no especial attraction. There is no questioning our apathy toward it and our favor for release from it. (Mészáros 262-263) How then do we approach life when we are ‘on our own time’? The pattern of production and consumption extends into our off hours, as does the alienation. We remain passive in most of our leisure activities. Fun in its myriad forms are industries themselves and the filling of leisure time is their commodity. Ultimately, our ‘free time’ is rarely that. Millions of dollars have been spent in research and marketing to direct consumers the moment they clock out. Time so spent results in nothing but the memory of the event. Perhaps a handful of souvenirs and snapshots remain. (Fromm The Sane Society 124-125)

Liberty

Closely linked in modern mind with autonomy is the idea of liberty. With the social ties weakened and autonomy entrenched, liberty is assumed to belong to individuals. This belonging is in fact so strong as to be considered a natural fact. Given this condition, social interactions may appear artificial impositions. Liberty as extended to the individual has been advanced and appropriated by the industrial machine. (Mészáros 254) Once liberated, a man can enter into a contract as a sovereign individual. Marxist

thought centers around the idea of the reification of human relations. In this sense of the word reification, social bonds are broken apart so that the elements of a person's nature and productivity can be made available more readily on the market.(Mészáros 35) Interestingly, Aristotle's conception of man as a primarily social being is now reversed. (Mészáros 254) Human beings become themselves commodities for the consumption of other human beings, held together by mutual self interest. (Fromm The Sane Society 126)

Equality

“Just as modern mass production requires the standardization of commodities, so the social process requires standardization of man, and this standardization is called ‘equality’.” (Fromm The Art of Loving 15) The concept of equality itself has been reshaped around the corporate need for uniformity. Prior to its modern connotation, equality had encompassed and even respected differences between individuals. Uniqueness and equality were not at odds. This modern equality squares our edges so that we may fit neatly, one with the other. Fromm asserts that we have an equality of *sameness* rather than *oneness*. (Fromm The Art of Loving 14-15) Individuals are brought down to the lowest common denominator. In our capitalistic society, a worker may be replaced quite easily because of this. Each person is a ‘commodity slave’ and the much heralded universal equality is vacant of any real human freedom. (Mészáros 262) Writing with skepticism of the equality of women, Fromm states, “women are equal because they are not different any more.” (Fromm The Art of Loving 14-15) If we nurture only our commonality, we are providing the means of our own dissolution.

Still Life with Fountain. Figure 2 illustrates a loss of identity through this equalizing conformity. As the title suggests, the human element is removed. This man can only be called a *still life* – inanimate. On another level, his life is still – stagnant. The man is powerless to move anything in his sphere. He is the passive receiver of action, pissing his life away. The word *fountain* in the title is a reference to Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*. Duchamp enjoyed playing with perceptions; is *Fountain* art or is it functional? To continue the analogy, is the human a grand creation – the measure of all things, or merely a functional object?

Ironically, *Still Life with Fountain* was censored from its first exhibition. The painting, *Reserved*, Figure 6 won the First Award in a juried regional art show sponsored by an area arts council. As part of the award, I was to have a solo exhibit in a prominent city-owned building. The painting was removed from the wall and stored in a vacant office by order of



Figure 2:
Perry Johnson – Still Life with Fountain
collection of the artist
40in x 50in - oil on canvas.

a private management firm. The building's primary purpose was to hold meetings and conventions. The management was concerned that such an obscene piece may hinder sales for their facility. It would appear that the marketing machine was in need of window dressing. An honest support of art was never the intention.

The Group

It is a basic need of humanity to be connected with that which is not the self. As a fetus, there is no anxiety of separation; there is indeed no separation. Individuation casts us across a chasm of disconnectedness that each of us attempts to bridge.

Conformity

Conformity is the most common relief from separateness. The group has highly developed rituals and prescriptions for behavior that need only be followed. Though there are instances of forced conformity, most people wish to conform and are perfectly willing to trade a measure of freedom for the peace of being at one with the group. (Fromm The Art of Loving 13) The choice available to modern man to dismiss social interaction was stated earlier. Given this, it would appear possible to observe conformity by choice rather than by necessity. While it is true that most of us do not hunt in packs for sustenance, conformity is often indirectly required of us in order to sustain our needs. Consider the lengths to which an employee may go to please an employer. A person may well have a mask for each manner of relationship. The mask is believed by all – often including the individual in

question – to be the genuine visage. People so conditioned to become what the market desires can arrive at nothing but a loss for their own identity. (Fromm *Escape From Freedom* 202)

Authority. We are led along prescribed paths. The leaders however remain invisible and thus unassailable. Even under authoritarian rule, those who loyally follow form a current of conformity, pulling others along. Our contemporary public is led by coercion, manipulation, and suggestion. There is no clear force against which to rebel. Identity is largely formed by what we are opposed to. As you will remember from the previous section, it is our opposition to the will of others that helps to develop our sense of individuality. (Fromm *The Sane Society* 138-139) Opinions are packaged neatly for consumption. We lift a pre-digested bolus from media and take it or mistake it for our own original thought. A quick glance at the television over a morning coffee provides a plug for the screaming silence at the water cooler at midday. (Fromm *Escape From Freedom* 202-203)

Mute: A Working Title. The man in Figure 3 has just received a memorandum. We do not know the contents of the memo. The title and the position of the paper suggest that the memo has silenced the man. He has no voice in this environment. The black background and a head filled with violent strokes emphasize his frustrated anger.

Marginal Differences. Conformity results in anxiety because the person has already recognized the self as being separate. Releasing that individuality results in a loss of identity. The individual *I* must be asserted. Fromm writes,



Figure 3:
Perry Johnson – Mute: A Working Title
collection of the artist
36in x 40in - oil on canvas.

Since there is still a need to feel some individuality, such need is satisfied with regard to minor differences; the initials on the handbag or the sweater, the name plate of the bank teller, the belonging to the Democratic as against the Republican party, to the Elks instead of to the Shriners becoming the expression of individual differences. The advertising slogan of “it is different” shows up in this pathetic need for difference, when in reality there is hardly any left. (Fromm *The Art of Loving* 12-13)

These marginal choices allow the individual a marginal degree of distinction. The differences are never so great that the even workings of the machine are hampered. The market proceeds in its production of largely identical products and as Fromm writes in *The Sane Society*, “On the market of opinions everybody is supposed to have a commodity of the same value, and it is indecent and not fair to doubt it.” (Fromm *The Sane Society* 142) As long as these differences, both material and mental, are only superficial

there is no cause for alarm. The machine operates within its limits and individuals remain safely the same. (Greenhalgh 248)

Necessity and Adaptation. The needs of food, water, shelter, sleep, and safety can be collectively thought of as the need for self-preservation. The satisfaction of these needs is non-negotiable. These basic drives are common to all people regardless of social, political, or economic environment. The work one must undertake however to satisfy these needs is of great variation.

The systems under which the worker works are largely unchangeable by the individual. The worker must then adapt to operate within this environment. The soft tissue of a humanity is bruised and made callous. A person's personality is shaped by the necessity of adaptation to a given system. The cycle continues as children are brought up to satisfy those needs in ways that have been determined effective. (Fromm *Escape From Freedom* 15-17)

Some Settling May Occur. The man in Figure 4 is uneasily standing next to a pallet of goods that towers just beyond his height. Eric Fromm writes, 'Capital commands labor; amassed things, that which is dead, are of superior value to labor, to human powers, to that which is alive.' (Fromm *The Art of Loving* 71) Man is no longer the measure of all things. His animal need for food is being met only in a superficial way. Just behind the glass are boxes of 'homemade pies', no doubt bearing the name of Mrs. So and So – as though an individual made them. Like a child, he stares at the ice cream. The stack of commodities rises like the tower of Babel. The chaotic pattern

of crisscrossing plastic alludes to confounded communication. Forming the cornerstone of the palette, there is a box of *Brillo* pads. Referencing Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*, art itself is just another commodity.



Figure 4:
Perry Johnson – Some Settling May Occur
collection of the artist
60in x 66in - oil on canvas.

Religion and Ritual

If there was a spiritual vacuum created by the Age of Reason, it was soon to be filled in the Age of the Machine. It bears clarification that a belief in reason or one's embrace of technology does not constitute a rejection of God or faith. Following the Greek view, to know logic is to know the mind of God. The machine was seen as a savior. It was hoped that the machine, like religion before it, would curb the unseemly parts of our nature. The rewards of the machine were to be realized in this life. President Calvin Coolidge said

“The man who builds a factory builds a temple. The man who works there worships there.” (Lucic 16)

In Vestments. Figure 5 illustrates the role of ritual in overcoming separation. Rituals performed by a group allow participants to feel connected. The self is able to dissolve back into the group because of the unifying force of shared acts and beliefs. Almost any feeling of restriction is acceptable if there is an accompanying connectedness. Figure 5 uses the image of men putting on their jackets to represent the restriction of dogma. This unity among practitioners of a ritual is amplified by their self denial and collective separation from the non-group. The attractive richness of liturgy and legacy is evident in the glow that emanates from the church. The mystery of religion is shown by the surrounding darkness. Ominous clouds



Figure 5:
Perry Johnson – In Vestments
collection of the artist
58in x 64in - oil on canvas.

symbolize the fear the faithful have. These saints put on their vestments, making their investments for the life beyond this one. The scripture quoted on the green glowing sign is I Corinthians 3:14. "If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward."

Ritual need not be of a religious nature. In fact, much of the benefit of religious gathering is social. Commonly accepted secular rituals such as watching football at the corner bar are repeated with a frequency that ensures some regular relief for the aloneness the individual feels. Each culture and subculture has its own rites and institutions that have evolved to meet this need. (Fromm *The Art of Loving* 15) From their ancient origins, rituals engender a feeling of connectedness with the subjects or the past practitioners of the ritual. Our culture's passion for competitive sport is an analog to mankind's struggle to achieve, dominate, cooperate, and ultimately conform. (Fromm *The Sane Society* 132)

Routine

From birth to death, from Monday to Monday, from morning to evening – all activities are routinized, and prefabricated. How should a man caught in this net of routine not forget that he is a man, a unique individual, one who is given only this one chance of living, with hopes and disappointments, with sorrow and fear, with the longing for love and the dread of the nothing and of separateness? (Fromm *The Art of Loving* 16)

Since the turn of the last century, mass production has been driven by the principles of 'scientific management'. Efficiency was the objective, and the machine its measure. The physical movements of workers were examined closely in order to remove any unnecessary expenditures of energy or time. It

is, after all, energy and time that industry purchases from the worker. In an environment of mass production, there is no active involvement of the intellect. Frederick Winslow Taylor, the founding proponent of scientific management, wrote that an ‘intelligent gorilla’ with training could be a more efficient worker than a human. (Lucic 17)

Reserved. The man in Figure 6 drifts across the parking lot to his appointed cubicle. He likely has his arrival timed to the second. He will be late enough to be only slightly defiant, but not so late as to cause rebuke. Each morning as he passes between the expensive vehicles of those reserved spaces, he resents their wealth and, more importantly, their power – over him. Our system of production is so deft that we can actually manufacture desire packaged as need. This artificial need holds the man powerless. His head is mostly cropped. The seat of his intellect is largely unused and his



Figure 6:
Perry Johnson – Reserved
collection of the artist
50in x 66in - oil on canvas.

identity unwelcome. The narrow band of cultivated grass and a dim reflection of sky are the remnants of nature and freedom.

Dr. Reilly, a character from T.S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party* gives a primer on following routine:

I can reconcile you to *the human condition*,
The condition to which some who have gone as far as you
Have succeeded in returning. They may remember
The vision they have had, but they cease to regret it,
Maintain themselves by the common routine,
Learn to avoid excessive expectation,
Become tolerant of themselves and others,
Giving and taking, in the usual actions
What there is to give and take. They do not repine;
Are contented with the morning that separates
And with the evening that brings together
For casual talk before the fire
Two people who know they do not understand each other,
Breeding children whom they do not understand
And who will never understand them.
(Mészáros 256)

Institutionalization

Thomas Carlyle observed that the institution is to human beings what the machine is to objects. This institutionalization does not have its beginning and end in commonly quoted institutions - the physical and functional entities. Once institutionalized, a person ceases to operate as a sovereign being. The individual will is deferred to the institution.
(Greenhalgh 68)

Education. In our contemporary culture, a child's instincts for judging the character of another person are not likely to remain intact. We

are taught to smile at everyone with an even friendliness. The natural hostility that results from being powerless is usually negotiated away, or more accurately suppressed. By the time we approach something resembling maturity in our animal qualities, our psychic qualities have atrophied. We are no longer able to recognize the genuine articles of good and bad nature in ourselves or in others. (Fromm *Escape From Freedom* 241)

Like the computing machines we are taught to emulate, we saturate our minds with information. Knowledge is consumed in the same fashion as fast food. Bits of information are readily available, but there is little breadth or depth in these short bursts. We come away empty, with some knowledge of data but without the ability to think. Original thoughts – originating in the mind of an individual – result from the connection and digestion of information. Confronted with the admittedly vast store of human knowledge but unequipped with the confidence that would have come from original thought, we defer to specialists. Within each field of study or practice there exists a multitude of specialists, each in varying degrees unaware and disconnected. So our specimen man on the street is reduced to helplessness in ignorance. (Fromm *Escape From Freedom* 249) (Greenhalgh 70)

Relativism. The Age of Reason centered around the idea that truth could be known. So much truth has been discovered; it would seem that each person has – as a birthright – a plethora of truths all to himself or herself. Perhaps as a way of regaining a sense of mystery, truth is quite often considered a metaphysical abstract. The scientific inquiry that was once synonymous with a search for truth must now be removed from such subjectivity. (Fromm *Escape From Freedom* 247) Postmodernists would

argue the relative nature of all things. Sifting through the background noise of any human act or fact, one will find evidence of a thousand vices and missteps. From scientific research to politics, the truth is deconstructed and manipulated. Fact is made fiction, and fiction is fact. (Greenhalgh 59) So without the first lesson in original thought and with truth itself unable to provide a foothold, we continue.

Destruction and Creation

Destruction

Unfulfilled needs and desires often lead to violence. A person may attempt to wrest control or possession through force, that which could not be attained by reason. (Fromm *The Heart of Man* 20) Upon reading this, our first inclination may be to assume the error in logic to be with the violent individual, after all we are told that violence is illogical. One has only to observe a bureaucratic machine to recognize that faulty reasoning may not rest on the individual. A person whose human powers of intellect, rationality, compassion, and curiosity have been nullified by the environment in which he or she lives may have little choice but animal behavior. Lewis Mumford writes in *Art and Technics*, 1952.

External order: internal chaos. External progress: internal regression. External rationalism: internal irrationality. In this impersonal and over-disciplined machine civilization, so proud of its objectivity, spontaneity too often takes the form of criminal acts, and creativeness finds its main open outlet in destruction. (Mumford as cited in Greenhalgh 21)

Productive Work

Harold Kushner writes of an added dimension possible in human work, that of legacy. We leave something behind for future generations not only through our progeny, but through enduring work. (Kushner 29-30) This life-affirming sort of activity is not the cursed work of the misinterpreted Genesis expulsion. Concerning Frederick Taylor's principles of efficiency, Antonio Gramsci writes:

Taylor is in fact expressing with brutal cynicism the purpose of American society – developing in the worker to the highest degree automatic and mechanical attitudes, breaking up the old psycho-physical nexus of qualified professional work, which demands a certain active participation of intelligence, fantasy and initiative on the part of the worker, and reducing productive operations exclusively to the mechanical, physical aspect.
(Gramsci as cited in Lucic 18)

It is this productive work that Marx argues has been objectified out of our nature. The things we produce, be they wagon wheels or works of art, Marx refers to as our “inorganic body”. Once labor has been made into a commodity itself, the products of that labor are more easily commodified. The thing produced is external and no longer seen as a part of the being. (Mészáros 81-82)

Once labor is made into an external thing apart from the person, the work is obviously no longer a part of the worker. The worker cannot feel like himself or herself while at work. (Mészáros 158) Indeed urban planning is complicit in this separation. Suburban residential areas empty their contents into urban places of work every morning. The commute only reaffirms the disconnection of work from life. (Greenhalgh 64-65)

Moving to a discussion of the work itself, the work does not belong uniquely to the worker. The manner of work we are discussing here is that which is forced upon a worker out of the worker's need to survive. This is a far cry from the self-affirming "life-activity" meaning of work. A wage earner, thus alienated from his or her work, can only satisfy the animal appetites of sustenance and artificial needs. (Mészáros 158) Acts of doing that are truly a part of being are but a myth believed only by young idealists or the lazy.

Human Relationships

The spontaneous development of human relationships is a creative act. There is certainly a degree of egotism in any relationship. The individual seeks relief from aloneness – to find connectedness and likeness. In the worst cases, there is a destructive codependence that inhibits growth.



Figure 7:
Perry Johnson – Consumption of the Virgin
collection of the artist
72in x 56in - oil on canvas

Consumption of the Virgin. Figure 7, illustrates some facets of a union whose purpose is the alleviation of aloneness. The title and the shape of the cross the mattresses form refer to the jurisdiction religion asserts over marriage. On an animal level, the sexual orgasm provides relief from separation. Two singular people couple and for a time, from time to time, there is a feeling of oneness. Though it may feel like a religious experience, its effect is temporary. The euphoria always recedes. The figure in the background is a salesman. His lewd fondling of the pillow is an indication of the sexual transaction and of his eagerness. His spirit is the colonizing force of narcissism. (Fromm *The Heart of Man* 84) The gray doors in the background secure a darkened room – a metaphor for hidden sins and transgressions.

CHAPTER 3

ARTISTIC PARALLELS AND INFLUENCES

Subject and Object

Concept

Art has not always been a thing unto itself, and in its most relevant expressions it is not so today. Makers of paintings, sculpture, and so forth did not commonly inscribe the work of their hands with the mark of their names until the Renaissance. The beliefs and desires of a village would be entrusted to the craftsman in the construction of an icon; the thing constructed can never wholly belong to any one person.

Humanists assumed that a main function of art was to underpin the intellectual and material *constructive* processes of society – that art was core to our chosen mode of existence, and that it should reflect and direct that existence. So art was perceived to be central to the pattern of modernity . . . After 25 years of cultural deconstruction, art is no longer perceived to have such a role, especially by those in the art professions. It no longer has to partake in these larger determined responsibilities; indeed, in its newly forged passive-aggressive mode, it is widely considered to be passé to think that it should try to do so. (Greenhalgh 249)

The modern feeling is that art should no longer be described as *high* or *fine*. The concern is that these terms serve to exclude. To attach labels that imply value is to apply a value judgement not only of the work but of the character of the creator. The title of *artist* is coveted because it signifies uniqueness and transcendence. ‘Creativity has become confused with narcissism and exhibitionism.’, says Kuspit. (Kuspit 152) Fame becomes the

objective that eclipses the art object. Having consumed the precious and fragile notion of individual creativity, it must be protected. The individual artist's cosmology is secured by subjectivity. The artist is unique – immune from objective criticism. There are no peers for a person who is one of a kind.

A thing removed unto itself however ceases to be relevant to anything save itself. Adam Gopnik's comment in *The New Yorker* cuts to the point, "Post-modernist art is, above all, post-*audience* art." (Bayles and Orland 55) As Art – noting the capital A – withdraws from public relevance, the environment polarizes. This high art is void of substance. Without the freedom to relate to the human public, it becomes obscure and incestuous. Non-objective art was welcomed into corporate boardrooms, valued for its monumentality, its modernity, and its safety. Without discernable meaning, these objects blend into the woodwork.

Kitsch and Odd Nerdrum.

The mandate of postmodern dispassion has never nullified passion. From the public's need, kitsch is created. Kitsch dares to have meaning, ornament, and beauty. (Steiner 112) Self-proclaimed kitsch painter, Odd Nerdrum finds value in the continuity of tradition. His subjects, modes, and methods are age old. Neither painting nor figuration are obsolete. For him, the human figure as a mode of communication remains potent. Human relevance is paramount to novelty. Expressing his disappointment, Nerdrum had this to say, "Modernism felt old and sad. I had seen so much of it that I was fed up." Continuing in this vein, "There is a wave of senility and apathy washing over the art world today... the painter stands there empty-handed before existence. He has lost any feeling for the functional in himself and in

nature.’ (Nerdrum as cited in Vine 172) While on a truncated trip to New York, Nerdrum met Andy Warhol. An assistant of Warhol smirked when Nerdrum made mention of his *Old Master* working style. Warhol said, ‘That’s OK, why not?’ To Nerdrum, this exemplified Postmodern indifference. (Pettersson 23) This apathy being the opposite of love – the antithesis of understanding and perversely inhuman. For Nerdrum, the *Big Bang* of Modernism was a destructive rather than creative force. It obliterated everything into the smallest of parts, more or less equal – equal in their indifference. Odd Nerdrum senses the disconnectedness of each human to humanity. Upon being drummed out of the Academy in Oslo, Nerdrum was asked to defend his choices of influences. His reply, ‘I have always found Rembrandt’s world more humane than Picasso’s ... The lifespan of a work of art is proportional to its human content.’ (Pettersson 23) This is an idea that Kuspit visits with regard to Picasso. Kuspit holds Picasso’s empathy suspect, asserting that style was always the driving force and only incidentally humane. (Kuspit 29) Odd Nerdrum has been and is being criticized as ignoring the grand evolution of art. (Hansen VII) To this, Nerdrum would respond that he is the keeper of the flame and that it is the art world that has lost its bearings.

Content

In this context, the word *content* implies an inventory of what is inside the framed space as well as the metaphoric charge carried by the piece.

Realism

The forms that realism assumes today are responses to historical developments. For Aristotle mimesis was a path to knowledge. Vermeer's paintings are virtuous reproductions of observable visual effects. While enchanting, the physical object becomes transparent and allows the viewer to see meaning. An Impressionist painting as an object is undeniable. The brushstroke reaffirms both the physicality and the humanity of the thing. Abstract Expressionists atomized the brushstroke as a singular self referring visual element. Meaning may be imported into the object, as in Barnett Newman's *Stations of the Cross*. Pop Art removes the wall altogether. The object is indistinguishable from the real – the art is artifice.

For Marx, realist work is given merit by what the artist chooses to represent and how humanly significant it is. The mere representation of a visually observed reality can be nothing but superficial. (Mészáros 195-196) Those who are incapable of seeing the difference between humanized and dehumanized realism are likely to cast aside realism altogether, persuing its artificial opposite. Artists who have thusly rejected naturalism may take up its perceived opposite, abstraction. The ever present need to humanize is exceedingly difficult for abstractionists; there is so precious little object for us to grasp hold of. (Mészáros 195-196) This is not to say that non objective painting cannot be meaningful to humans. Any sufficiently neutral arrangement of visual stimuli can provide the human mind great pleasure. A chaotic stroke of paint could become any number of objects or impressions; the viewer is invited to actively apply reason whether or not any reason existed in the creation of the piece. Abstractions can be removed from the

emotional charge of the real. Objects carry emotional and intellectual charge. Recognizing that a composition contains a letter, as in the case of Vermeer's *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*, Figure 8, leads to a multitude of possibilities surrounding that object. It would seem that there is an immutable desire to identify objects. Vermeer's objects are chosen for theatric effect. The actors, the setting, the props – all come together not to merely represent reality, but to bring reality into focus. This reality in concentrated form is not a mere proxy for perceptual reality. Objects and symbols allow the viewer to grasp conceptual reality. (Lucie-Smith 11)

The Human Figure

There is nothing in this world of matter that matters more to mankind than the human figure. It is a form most familiar, without equal in its emotional charge. It is for this reason that Ralph Goings abstained from painting the figure until his fascination with diners in New England seemed to demand it. The occupants of Goings' diners are typically turned from view. (Chase and Goings 12) In my current body of work, the figures are turned away not to diffuse their charge but to indicate their discharged states. My figures have become the passive receivers of action. Eric Fischl relies on the energy inherent in the human figure. His figures remain reactive. His paintings articulate tension. The environment is admittedly psychological. It is the human form however that is the point of connection, allowing us to become voyeurs if not participants.

Craft

Painting. The viability of the medium has been under attack for decades. The application of colored paste to a two-dimensional surface with hairy sticks is neither modern nor novel. Painting is a subjective medium; it lacks the mechanical efficiency of photography. Photography is more modern – a beautiful synthesis of the mechanical, the chemical, the optical, and now the digital. It would seem also that photography is more capable of performing one of painting's earliest tasks, that of reproducing visual reality. Painting remains alive. Donald Kuspit writes:

They have declared it to be obsolete, but the grounds on which they do so are completely beside its human point: its power to evoke and convey what is subjectively fundamental in human experience... modern painting preserves the impulse to transcendence – indeed, satisfies, however mystically, the basic human need for transcendence – in a secular society that denies that there is any. (Kuspit 1-5)

The materials and process of painting – regardless of the object that results – are a source of exhilaration. The smell of the oils alone is intoxicating. While I'm sure this is a conditioned response, that fact does not diminish my pleasure. My intellect is stimulated by the intimate details – such as the chemistry of pigments and vehicles. The physicality of preparing a surface and painting on it are an analog of the mental processes of construction and transformation. Each discrete process informs the others, forming intuitive connections.

Artists

Johannes Vermeer

The paintings of Vermeer draw us into the psychology of his people. Vermeer attained a kind of individual Humanism to which other genre painters rarely arrived. Like Edward Hopper, Vermeer also used architectural elements and objects to frame human figures and direct the viewer's eye. His placement of chairs or maps is not arbitrary. The effect is calculated. Vermeer's narratives, while often anchored in Dutch symbolism of the time, are sparse in detail. In his *Woman in Blue, Reading a Letter*, Figure 8 for example, there is a letter and a map. Symbolism of the time would lead us to



Figure 8:
Johannes Vermeer - *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*
Collection Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam
46.5cm x 39cm - oil on canvas
(Image courtesy of Rijksmuseum)

believe that this is a love letter and that her husband is far away. There is one more thing; she appears to be pregnant. This leads us down an entirely different path with a whole slew of unanswered questions.

Vermeer was in love with light. His figures are bathed in light he created by careful manipulation of edges, color, and gradation. A corner of his studio is transformed by light. The setting is made appropriate for his intended contemplation. Vermeer's shadows have life and the darkness is an important element in its own right. Areas of light are often cut by dark forms; there are sophisticated value inversions. Like Hopper, Vermeer emphasizes the geometry of planes in space.

Vermeer was also a man who embraced technology as a means of understanding nature and as a means of producing art. His use of the camera obscura may be likened to my use of a computer and image manipulation software. The figure of the soldier is quite large in his painting entitled *Soldier and a Laughing Girl*. Students of optics will readily attribute this to the effect of a lens. While it is true that a lens is a likely filter for an image seen by Vermeer, there was also another filter at work – that of his mind. Vermeer's decision to use the distortion offered him by the lens is one of aesthetics and not of mere technological convenience.

Raphael Soyer

Raphael Soyer's paintings are emotive. In an interview for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art, Soyer recalls a time when artist's reputations were not so 'jazzed up'. Soyer seems honest and even humble in the interview and his work is equally so. Soyer was a master of the craft of painting. More importantly, he was a keen observer not only of the figure but



Figure 9:
 Raphael Soyer – Dressmaker's Shop
 Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Louis D. Cohen, Great Neck, New York
 39 $\frac{1}{4}$ in x 35 $\frac{1}{2}$ in - oil on canvas
 (Image from Soyer and Goodrich 177)

of an encompassing humanity in the figure. Often labeled a *Social Realist*, Soyer disliked the term, seeing the movement's propagandist agenda as disingenuous. The focus of Soyer's work seems to have been the people – as individual human beings. While others painted workers and capitalists with a veneer of realism, Soyer painted people simply and honestly. The passage from the Smithsonian interview quoted below frames Soyer's thoughts on a number of subjects pertinent to this thesis.

I think that our civilization is not amenable to art. That's all. It's a technological civilization, and what the artists used to do can be done technologically today. To paint portraits, to paint compositions, to describe what happened in Vietnam, or so on. They don't need any Delacroix anymore who painted the

Massacre at Chiaos. . . . I think that this is the reason to me for a kind of confusion among artists, or in them, or confusion in art. The artists simply don't know what to do with themselves. They're not absolutely needed by our technological civilization, so they try to do almost anything to call attention to themselves, and to do crazy things at times, to have an empty canvas and say it's a work of art. There are of course artists, there are people who still want to express themselves, still want to do something that they look at, they see, and they want, they see it in their own personal way, and they have a desire to communicate, you see. But it's difficult, it's difficult. And it's difficult, very difficult for representational painters. I mean, representationalism existed so long, such a long time, that, you know, it's difficult to be a representational painter of today. I mean, so many things are unpaintable anymore. I used to paint New York streets at one time, and I loved perspective and I loved space, and now the streets are devoured by traffic. There's no perspective anymore, no space anymore, and everything is so on top of you. (Soyer and Brown)

Edward Hopper

Edward Hopper shows us the lonely city – industrialized and urbanized. His figures are not only disconnected from nature but from one another. Moving past the Industrial Revolution into the Information Age, this disconnection becomes amplified. Millions of men and women work day in and day out as conduits for information. The capacity of the human mind to evaluate and escalate an issue is today's analog to the body's capacity to shape matter that was yesterday's fulcrum of progress.

The geometry of Hopper's architecture creates an energy that is met by the psychological energy of his lonely figures. It is not the narrative that Hopper relates that I find exciting but the narrative that he suggests. Hopper's peers also painted urban malaise and architecture, but his

uniqueness lies in his clever compositions and in his empathy.

Hopper restrained his ability to represent reality. His architecture is not bustling with every minute detail. His figures are generalized. In his painting, he also prompts the viewer to imagine a reality far more compelling. Hopper was a professional illustrator. Within this field, it is necessary to pare a subject down to its essential elements. Unnecessary elements are distractions which complicate the page. Hopper took on the task of suggesting reality as opposed to recreating it. Frank Lloyd Wright said, “The truth is more important than the facts.” (Peter 473) Slavishly painted details, however accurate they may be, may hinder the viewer’s acceptance of the image as genuine. A story with too many details is likely a



Figure 10:
Edward Hopper – Hotel Lobby
William Ray Adams Memorial Collection
Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis
32 $\frac{1}{4}$ in x 40 $\frac{3}{4}$ in - oil on canvas
(Image courtesy of Indianapolis Museum of Art)

false one. Hopper gives the viewer a version of reality that is an acceptable proxy for the real thing. A painting on a two-dimensional surface does not offer the same experience as a view through a window. Given that, Hopper only specifies enough detail to give us a locus – a framework to build into. In my mind, this is a great power the painter has. I composite images and delete extraneous elements, creating a reality, one in which I gladly sacrifice specificity so that a more general and accessible reality may be found.

Geometry seems to have fascinated Hopper. The architectural forms and their shadows provide that geometry. These lines, repetitions, complementary and supplementary angles are visual and narrative devices. Points of intersection and implied line frame the figures and direct the viewer's attention. The geometry is alive and monumental.

Ralph Goings

If one were to imagine a logical end to realism, the work of Ralph Goings may come to mind. Goings never denies the significant role photography plays in his work. The photographs serve as working drawings. Many images are exposed to film and examined later with regard to their fitness for canvas. (Goings 6) Though my work differs greatly, my process would seem to have more in common with that of Richard Estes who combines elements from several source images. Estes resizes, adjusts, and manipulates elements. The composites Estes creates are informed by the camera; the camera's perceptual defects are readily corrected. (Lucie-Smith 200)

Goings' reluctance to employ the figure was discussed earlier. The imagery Goings chooses are notably commonplace, almost neutral in their



Figure 11:
 Ralph Goings – Duke Diner
 private collection
 40in x 54in - oil on canvas
 (Image courtesy of OK Harris Works of Art)

banality. Acknowledging the lack of beauty in his objects, Goings has said that he paints such subjects because they are “terrifically beautiful to paint”. (Chase and Goings 9) In the process of painting visual effects, there are a multitude of areas that could be seen as abstractions when viewed at close range. Having the drawing as a framework, I paint areas of abstraction – disassociated from their symbolic importance. Formal elements are my primary concern – color, value, texture, shape, and so on. Only when taken into the eye and processed by the brain all at once is the symbol reconstructed.

Eric Fischl

Modern society avoids deviation or extremity. Human beings cannot live on this static flat line where there are no crests and troughs – no life.

Fischl's paintings are confrontational. Fischl writes,

I think my paintings were generated by a lot of anger, focussed on the place I came from, the suburbs. . . . In the environment I grew up in there was no ability to acknowledge what the reality was. Everything was confined to a set of acceptable images, and they didn't often conform to what was really happening. (Hughes 600)

Fischl has observed that modern society is incapable of supporting the crises of life. We are encouraged to deny that extremes exist. The figures in Fischl's compositions are awkward and self-conscious. Their anxiety is palpable.

Fischl confesses his own anxiety with regard to his education in painting. He received an art education during a time when traditional modes and methods were thought dead. (Hughes 601) For me, what Fischl lacks in painting ability is recovered by the the structure in his compositions. The angles – both of architecture and of light – create wonderful geometry.

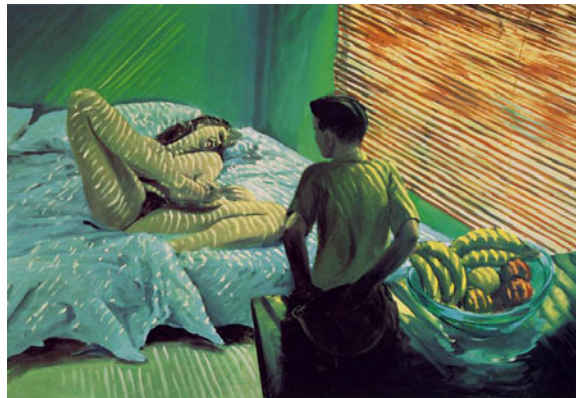


Figure 12:
Eric Fischl – Bad Boy
Private collection, Zurich
66in x 96in - oil on canvas
(Image courtesy of Mary Boone Gallery)

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

Art is a great intersection. All science, all craft, and indeed all of human endeavor is available to the artist. In closing, I acknowledge the necessarily incomplete nature of this work. Through my research I see the threads of my thought are woven with those of others. The continuity is affirming. I have no desire to become a writer so I will continue to explore the thoughts written here and their connections in a visual language.

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